

## The elusive international

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**Justin Rosenberg**

University of Sussex

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### **Corresponding Author**

Justin Rosenberg, Department of International Relations, University of Sussex, BN19RH, UK. Email: [j.p.rosenberg@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:j.p.rosenberg@sussex.ac.uk)

The fundamental claim of ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’ is that we in IR have never fully realized the potential of our subject matter: the international dimension of the social world. Torn between a negative orthodox definition (as the absence of central authority) and a critical reaction which resists any essentializing of ‘the international’, we have never made the positive intellectual case for IR’s contribution to the wider social sciences. As a result, there is no IR equivalent to the big, trans-disciplinary ideas that have emerged over the decades from Geography, History, Sociology, Anthropology and Comparative Literature; and the intellectual standing of our field remains uncertain and vulnerable even while it attracts more students on more degree programmes than ever before.

The article traces this peculiar situation to the enduring status of IR as a sub-field of Political Science. But it devotes most of its energy to the question of how the ‘prison’ can be breached. The means, it suggests, are ready to hand. For the universal fact that human social development is not unitary but multiple is fraught with consequences for social reality. On the one hand, multiplicity entails the existence of a many-sided inter-societal domain which cannot be fully comprehended by theories drawn from the analysis of ‘society’ in the singular; and on the other hand, this same universal fact plays a deep and continuous role in the *internal* constitution of domestic societies themselves, extending the significance of the international into the subject matter of the other social sciences and humanities. At the deepest level, therefore, multiplicity is for IR what space is for Geography, time for History, culture for Anthropology, power for Political Science and so on: it is the ontological premise for a specialized field of study which nonetheless has general significance for social analysis of all kinds. What is truly remarkable is that this premise has remained largely unactivated within IR itself. Even Realism has allowed its implications to remain imprisoned in the political sphere and (especially in its neorealist variant) has not explored its impact beyond the external relations of states and societies. Outside Realism, meanwhile, it is hard to think of a single branch of IR theory that comprises *international* theory in this sense: namely that it reasons from the fact of the international as a fundamental dimension of the social world. Little

wonder then that IR has played such a meager role in the conversation of the modern social sciences: by our own account, we have so little of our own to say.

It is this unhappy assumption, finally, that the article seeks to overturn. First, it enumerates five general 'consequences of multiplicity' which outline the significance of the international for social reality. Together, these form the general warrant for a discipline of IR that extends beyond the subject matter of Political Science. On this widened terrain, Realism is joined by a second international theory – Leon Trotsky's idea of uneven and combined development (UCD). Trotsky's idea already operationalizes the consequences of multiplicity much more fully than does Realism, but it by no means exhausts their potential. Just as the works of, say, Robert Sack, Edward Soja, Doreen Massey and David Harvey in Geography have unfurled the significance of spatiality in different directions and different registers, so too the significance of the international bears – and indeed requires – treatment in a variety of idioms and across numerous varied issue areas. The realization that such a development still lies ahead of us gives reason to hope that we are living not at 'the end of IR theory'<sup>ii</sup> but rather at its beginning.

I am grateful to the five contributors to the present forum for their highly challenging but generous-spirited criticisms of this argument. They have set high standards, and I shall do my best to live up to these in what follows. If there is a common thread to our varied engagements, it lies, perhaps inevitably, in the question of the international itself: what it means, how to conceptualise it, and what other pitfalls, apart from the prison of Political Science, we must avoid in our attempts to do it justice. If we do not find agreement on this question, at least our debate may serve to bring it out into the open, where it surely belongs.

## **1. Levels of Theory**

It will come as no surprise that I find much to agree with in Stephen Brooks' response. For if Brooks' goal is to limit the role of 'grand theory', his purpose therein is nonetheless to liberate it to play in IR the vital role that it has for every discipline. In this Merton-inspired view, grand theories provide the orienting assumptions within a given field: they tell us what phenomena to look for; they offer models of how these phenomena may be connected; and they facilitate cumulative knowledge production by linking concepts and assumptions in a systematic way. But grand theories can never themselves do the work of empirical explanation. This task falls to the 'middle-range theories' that they generate, and that deploy more specific hypotheses about actual historical events and phenomena. Thus the two types of theory need each other. It is the organizing and clarifying role of grand theory that enables middle-range work to be both clear about its underlying assumptions and cumulative in its intellectual consequences. Grand theories, meanwhile, if not directed into the production of middle-range hypotheses, would turn all their fire on each other in a pointless (because undecidable) battle to become 'King of the Hill' – the single general theory that best explains everything. For Brooks, IR theory has always struggled to maintain the proper balance between these two. In the postwar decades,

grand theorizing absorbed most of its energies; since 2000, however, the emphasis has been, perhaps excessively, on hypothesis-testing, at the expense of more encompassing analyses. Thus Brooks' response to my article is a cautious welcome: we do need more grand theory in IR today, but only so long as this does not mean an attempt to establish the grand theory of UCD as 'King of the Hill'.

I agree. Indeed, I too distinguished two different levels of theory: a general claim about multiplicity as the basis of IR's distinctive subject matter, and the particular approaches (such as Realism or UCD) which could then be fielded to explore this subject matter. And yet a moment's reflection reveals that Brooks and I are not talking about exactly the same thing. For him, approaches like Realism and UCD already *are* the grand theories which generate and organize the middle-range hypotheses that compete to explain international phenomena.<sup>iii</sup> There is no further level of IR-specific theory above them. In my argument, by contrast, they are the lower-lying models that populate a field defined by a yet 'grander' IR claim about human life in general – that it is profoundly shaped by the fact of societal multiplicity. Our models thus overlap, but from different directions. Why is this difference important?

First, it is this 'grander' level of theorization – not visible in Brooks' model – which specifies IR's distinctive contribution to social theory. Our focus on societal multiplicity as a dimension of the human world both distinguishes us among the social sciences and connects us to their common preoccupation – the analysis of social reality. Consequently, this is also the level at which the international can be most easily posed outside the 'prison of Political Science', because here alone it is evident that the consequences of multiplicity extend much wider than the domain of politics, and much deeper than the external relations of societies. If so, then Brooks' two-level model of theory in IR does not reach to the kind of theorizing we need in order to solve the problem raised in my article. In order to track down the international, we need the third level.

Second, once the 'levels' of IR theory are re-visioned through the addition of this third, 'ontological', level, our narrative of the discipline's evolution changes too. Brooks describes an early over-emphasis on grand theory followed by a sharp decline which needs compensation – but not the introduction of fundamentally new elements. On my reading, by contrast, there is a crucial, discipline-defining moment of 'grander theory' that has simply never happened in IR. All the foundational statements I can think of have been formulated at level two, and inside the prison of Political Science. They have asked 'what is international politics as a subset of politics in general?' rather than 'what is the international as a dimension of the social world?'. We can observe this even in the mainstream discipline's narrative of its own development via a series of 'great debates'. Whether or not this narrative is historically accurate, it is striking that none of these supposed 'great debates' has engaged the ontology of the international in general; what has rather been at issue has been either (as in the 'first great debate') its implications for politics, or (in all the others) the epistemological question of how the production of knowledge about it should proceed. Where, one might ask, is the 'great debate' about what the international actually is?

Third, it is this alternative narrative that in turn explains why ideas have not travelled from IR to other disciplines. If, as Brooks suggests, postwar IR was amply stocked with all the grand theory it needed, this inter-disciplinary silence would be difficult to explain. And yet it makes sense once we observe that IR's questions about the international have simply not been posed at a high enough level for its relevance to the subject matter of other disciplines to be visible. For this problem, Merton's ideas do not seem to provide a solution.

## 2. Locations of Theory

If Brooks' main concern is to closely circumscribe the role and definition of (grand) theory, Laura Shepherd takes almost the opposite view. For she suggests that my argument suffers from a too restrictive definition of what IR theory is, and who are its practitioners. I have assumed that it is a contemplative activity carried out by trained academics whose ideas fit neatly into the disciplinary 'isms' which in turn are summarized in the pages of IR textbooks. In fact, however, not only does this 'isms' framework obscure those forms of theory that cannot be fitted into one or another of its classifications; it also neglects all the ways in which the praxis of conscious human subjects is itself a form of embodied theory – and by far the greatest part of the total theoretical activity that occurs in the human world. Had I looked to this wider resource, I would have found that pragmatic theorizations of the international as the consequences of societal multiplicity are not lacking at all: they are, for example, the very marrow of the praxis of activist campaigners for women's rights who routinely navigate and engage a world shaped by societal multiplicity.

Three points, then, need to be answered here: my reliance on textbook accounts of IR theory; my use of the 'isms' framework for describing the field; and my exclusion of the practical theorizing of engaged subjects. Let me take each in turn.

Actually, my reliance on IR textbooks was rather slight – four citations out of more than ninety. Only twice did I cite *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*. And even then, it was not the authority of the textbook that I was relying upon. After all, if a sleepy 'over-simplifying' (2) textbook writer tells me that a leading critical approach to IR is 'not a model or theory of international relations',<sup>iv</sup> I might well disregard the claim. But if these same words are used by David Campbell about post-structuralism, then I sit up and take notice, and I certainly do not discount them simply because they feature in a textbook chapter.

That said, I wish I had made more use of textbooks to support my argument. For as Shepherd says, 'the purpose of... textbooks is to generalize, consolidate, and make accessible' the contents and shape of a given field. Their task is precisely to provide an overview so that we can see how that field constitutes itself. It follows that the absence of a positive theoretical conception of the international *here* would be *even more* significant than its neglect in the original writings of

individual scholars. And – remarkably – it *is* absent here. Textbooks in Political Science (or Geography or Gender Studies) routinely begin with the claim that there is a political (or spatial or gendered) dimension to just about everything. But where is the equivalent claim in IR? Even *International Relations Theories* spends most of its pages on approaches that instead bring ideas from elsewhere to bear on the analysis of international affairs. The inverse procedure of elaborating the implications of the international for other fields of study does not appear – not in the Preface (where the Editors lay out the seven ‘thematics’ which compose the ‘rationale for the book’), not in the Introduction (even though it includes a sub-section on ‘what do the theories share?’) and not in the fifteen substantive chapters which provide the detailed expert survey of IR as a field of theoretical debate. And I mean no criticism of this excellent textbook: for in this regard it accurately represents the intellectual posture of the discipline as a whole.

Shepherd’s second criticism is that my depiction of the field as a collection of ‘isms’ leads me ‘to overlook the spaces between the neatly bounded packages of disciplinary knowledge’ (3) – the spaces in which real people and their lived experiences reside. This must be true. There is surely no such thing as a person whose identity and experience are entirely captured by ‘realism’, ‘Marxism’ or even ‘Feminism’. These ‘isms’ are indeed abstractions designed to capture shared currents of thought and practice. They are therefore necessarily both partial and restrictive. And yet we all need abstractions of this kind – without their generalizing role, we would face an indescribable field in which there were as many approaches as there are people on the planet. Shepherd herself seems (I think rightly) comfortable with invoking ‘isms’ in this sense – as when she refers to the contribution that specifically ‘feminist insights’ (3) can make to thinking about theory. (‘Feminist’, after all, presupposes ‘feminism’.) Moreover, while all ‘isms’ are indeed limited, they are not necessarily limited to a conservative intellectual politics, as Shepherd seems to imply: becoming an ‘ism’ is a key means by which radical new approaches too stake their claim to *general* significance, their right to a recognized voice of their own in intellectual debate. *Feminism*, *post-structuralism*, *post-colonialism*, *queer theory* – these are not bloodless abstractions but demands for particular viewpoints to be recognized as important, coherent perspectives on social reality. In short, it is neither possible nor even desirable for us to avoid ‘isms’ when engaging with fields of debate. But if – as I found in my survey of non-Realist IR theories – the ‘isms’ in a given discipline do not draw their claims from what is distinctive in its subject matter, this does tell us something important: namely that the intellectual emergence and self-definition of that discipline is in some crucial way unfinished.

But perhaps I am still looking in the wrong place for the international theory I seek? This is Shepherd’s third criticism: that I have neglected the theoretical practice of engaged activists. There does at first appear to be a real egalitarian appeal to the claim that as conscious human subjects ‘we are all theorists’ (3). It also implies the happy thought that there exists a vast reservoir of international theory that we can access if only we give up our elitist assumptions about what

theory is. Yet claims like these bring difficulties too, which can readily be seen in the present case.

The problem we face in IR is not that people (in all walks of life) cannot be seen to engage on a daily basis with the fact of the international. As I noted in the article, '*all* the social sciences and humanities encounter the *results* of this fact, just as IR encounters the significance of spatiality, textuality and so on in its own subject matter' (9). The problem is rather that (unlike Geography, Comparative Literature and so on) IR has produced no explicit positive theorization of what the international is – a circumstance that simultaneously deprives IR of its intellectual confidence and leaves all the other disciplines to wrestle, apparently endlessly, with the fallacies of internalism, methodological nationalism and unilinear thinking. This problem is simply not addressed by saying that we are all practical theorists of the international – any more than it would help to say that we are theorists of space because we observe a spatial order in our daily lives, or theorists of capitalism because we routinely navigate (or even contest) its social relations. Humans have been living with and engaging the consequences of multiplicity for many centuries; and yet the lack of an explicit theorisation of this condition has endured well into the era of the modern social sciences (however brilliantly all kinds of thinkers have analysed its effects on numerous aspects of social life). Among all the modern disciplines, IR is surely the one in which we would expect this problem to have been identified and overcome. If it has not been, that suggests to me not that IR is uniquely elitist, but rather that we have run into some special difficulty in this case. There must be a reason why, as Kenneth Waltz once put it, '[s]tudents of international politics have had an extraordinarily difficult time casting their subject in theoretical terms'.<sup>v</sup> Arguably this reason has two parts: one is the exceptionally deep hold that internalist forms of reasoning have on our ways of thinking (what Martin Wight called 'the intellectual prejudice imposed by the sovereign state');<sup>vi</sup> but the other is the unfinished emergence of IR as the academic discipline that should be providing the means to counter this prejudice. And that latter incompleteness can ultimately be solved only at the level where it obtains: the level of formal theory.

Finally, the claim that 'we are all theorists' is, on closer inspection, politically double-edged too. For the list of those whose praxis engages the international extends well beyond those – like campaigners for women's rights – whose political goals we approve. It includes not only all the world's states, but also arms dealers, multinational corporations, anti-immigration campaigners, international terrorists and extreme nationalists of all kinds. If 'we theorize... about how to make a cup of tea, or avoid traffic on our daily commute' (3), we surely cannot deny the title of international theorist to all these agents who, no less than the feminist campaigners, must navigate the consequences of multiplicity if they are to achieve their ends. On normative as well as cognitive grounds, therefore, an appeal to embodied theory seems unlikely to provide a solution.

All in all, I welcome Shepherd's move to 'complicate the image presented of International Relations theory' (1) in my article; I accept her judgments that

textbooks involve a politics of representation, that 'isms' can oversimplify, and that in some sense 'we are all theorists'. But do these complications address the basic problem that IR has a lopsided relationship with the other disciplines because it has not yet taken full possession of its own subject matter? Of this I remain uncertain.

### 3. Disciplines of Theory

For Patrick Jackson, however, this 'basic problem' is no cause for concern in the first place. On the contrary, he questions both the need and the wisdom of any attempt to define IR too closely as a discipline. Academic fields, he suggests, do not need to have a unique and stable 'point of view' from which to examine the world. Indeed, viewed over time, all the major established disciplines can be seen to undergo continuous debate about their intellectual practice: 'realist vs constructivist, nomothetic vs ideographic, positive vs critical, and the like' (2). Furthermore, responding to this ferment by making ontological claims about our subject matter brings a triple danger of setting 'fundamental boundaries on subsequent enquiry', of '*disciplining* international studies writ large into International Relations' and even of excluding other voices by 'determining what *isn't* appropriate for generating knowledge' of international affairs (3). In the face of these dangers, is it not better to rest content with IR as 'a meeting place for a variety of intellectual disciplines around a common concern with international affairs' (3)? We do not want, after all, to replace the prison of Political Science with a no less restrictive one of our own making in IR.

Well, amen to that last sentiment – but should we then just leave things as they are? As already indicated, my own grounds for concern are wider than Jackson suggests. It is not simply that 'poor IR has nothing to call its own' (1) (though this is a complaint that has been raised by a long line of thinkers from Stanley Hoffman, Fred Halliday and Chris Brown to Barry Buzan, Richard Little and the contributors to EJIR's 'The End of Theory?' special issue).<sup>vii</sup> There is also an IR-shaped hole in the *lingua franca* of social theory, and it is arguably in everyone's interest that it should be filled.

But is Jackson nonetheless right to suggest that this problem cannot and should not be addressed by exercises in disciplinary definition? Let us examine his reasoning. His first step is to claim that academic fields or disciplines get along fine without having any stable 'point of view'; viewed historically, they turn out to be continuously changing their vantage points as first one approach and then another gains the upper hand. But Jackson's examples – realist vs constructionist etc. – are not so much about the *object* of disciplinary focus as about the changing ways of studying it. Do these objects – at a deeper level – really change so wildly? Was Political Science ever *not* grounded fundamentally in the study of power? Has spatiality ever proven to be just a passing interest of Geography? Jackson raises the extra example of Economics, noting that assumptions about 'how economists thought' have altered sharply and repeatedly over time. But what surely does not change across all the iterations he mentions is the underlying feature of social reality on which the discipline of Economics (and Political



Economy) subtends: namely that all human societies subsist materially through organized processes of production and exchange. Is this not the unique (if often tacit) premise of Economics as a discipline? And can we even think of academic fields that are not in the end 'about' one particular aspect of reality rather than others?

If not, then the issue is no longer whether disciplines *have* stable cores; it is rather what to do about them. And Jackson's second step is to caution against turning them into ontological claims because this risks drawing the boundaries of the subject too tightly. What happens next is therefore something of a surprise.

Jackson proposes that we should give up the notion of IR as a discipline in favour of 'international studies as a meeting-place for a variety of academic disciplines around a common concern with international affairs' (3). I am not sure why these other 'disciplines' are not also to be dissolved by the same logic – what do they have that IR does not? But the key point is that Jackson then offers a definition of the international as 'the encounter with difference across boundaries' (3-4). This is an attractive definition. But I cannot help noticing that it does involve defining the content of an academic field in relation to a particular feature of social reality (i.e. ontologically). What is more, even though Jackson is reaching for 'the broadest possible' (4) definition so as to avoid 'defining anyone or anything *out of* IR' (4), his choice is actually tighter and more restrictive than my own premise of societal multiplicity. Not all aspects of the international are rooted in difference. Some – like the security dilemma – derive from the simple fact that societies co-exist with others, irrespective of whether those others are qualitatively different in some way. A large part of Kenneth Waltz's intellectual career was built on the analysis of international logics deriving from the *sameness* of all states. We might disagree with his analysis, but we would presumably not want to exclude him from our definition of international theory. There is an obvious solution here – namely that we widen our definition to 'societal multiplicity'. But Jackson resists this:

...simple multiplicity isn't sufficient, in my view; after all, there could be multiple human groups existing in relative isolation, and whether those groups even encounter one another and interact sufficiently to have an important impact on one another is, in the end, an empirical question... (4)

This strikes me as a huge and quite unnecessary concession to 'the intellectual prejudice imposed by the sovereign state'. The empirical consensus of World Historians is that such free-standing social groups have never actually existed except in freakish, temporary circumstances. And to hold open – even as a thought experiment – the possibility that they could hypothetically exist is to drastically undersell the significance of the international as a universal dimension of social being.

Jackson's laudable goal is to avoid replacing the 'prison of Political Science' with a prison of IR. Yet these are not equivalents. As his own reflections demonstrate, all fields of study have to be delimited, whether or not we call them disciplines. But the 'prison of Political Science' is something different from this. For IR, the

sentence it imposes is not exclusion but confinement. Receiving visitors – being a meeting place for other disciplines – certainly means some relief from an exclusively political definition of the international. But so long as we remain confined – so long as we have not posed the international in a way that reveals its significance for the social world in general – the traffic seems destined to remain one-way. And I cannot shake off the feeling that our subject matter warrants more than that.

#### 4. Ideologies of Theory

In the most radical of all four responses, David Blaney and Arlene Tickner contest the whole idea that IR has been trapped inside a ‘prison of Political Science’, or that it can be released simply by taking on an intellectual problematic of multiplicity. The standard ‘Aberystwyth narrative’ (4) of IR’s interwar origins, they argue, conveniently suppresses the darker history of the discipline. Long forgotten but recently disinterred, this history shows that IR was from the start already preoccupied with the cultural multiplicity of the world, which it resolved into a shameless hierarchy of racial and colonial domination. In this regard, IR had already found its special place among the modern sciences, all of which had emerged partly in reaction to the world of cultural difference encountered by Europe in the course of its rise to global dominance. This reaction shaped the division of labour among the disciplines (for example, separating Sociology as the study of modern societies from Anthropology as the study of primitives); and it also bequeathed them a common ideological device: the idea of ‘development’ through which the spatial ‘pluri-verse’ of difference was re-ordered into a temporal ‘uni-verse’ of the same, with all societies positioned as ‘advanced’ or ‘backward’ on a single ladder of development. Thus, not only does my embrace of ‘the Aberystwyth narrative’ obscure the real history of IR’s engagement with multiplicity; even worse, my proposed solution – ‘uneven and combined *development*’ – reinstates the foundational category on which rests the real prison we need to escape: the prison of colonial modernity. This is a powerful set of charges indeed. What can I say in reply?

Let me begin by noting some areas of large, if half-hidden, agreement. Although Blaney and Tickner set out to challenge my ‘origins story’, their own version turns out to share almost all the essential details. For them too, IR was allocated a residual slot in the modern division of labour among the disciplines. It was shaped by the consolidation of Political Science as the study of modern government, which in turn generated an image of the international in terms of a dangerous *lack* of government (6). Thus we share the idea that IR was formed *inside* the problematic of Political Science, but in *negative* terms. Our two prisons may turn out to be one and the same.

Moreover, we also share the idea that IR ‘ought’ to be based on the recognition of human life as manifold and co-existing rather than homogeneous and hierarchical. Thus when Blaney and Tickner say that multiplicity cannot be the answer (because IR’s history shows that multiplicity can be constructed in racist and hierarchical ways), what they really mean is that we need to embrace a

*positive* conception of multiplicity as legitimate difference: ‘attention to multiplicity requires releasing IR from the prison of colonial modernity’ (7).

And finally, I believe we also share a common intellectual challenge: how to grasp the human world as simultaneously multiple and yet – by virtue of its interconnections – making up a single whole. Blaney and Tickner worry that this brings the danger of lapsing into imagining ‘a singular world or uni-verse’ (7), and they propose instead ‘the alternative and ultimately more radical possibilities posed by a pluri-verse of many different worlds’ (8). But in the end, the stubbornly singular noun – ‘a pluri-verse’ – shows that the challenge has not gone away. Even the many worlds of difference ultimately comprise one world – a particular configuration of human societies and their interrelations. ‘Uneven and combined development’ is one response to this challenge. And I do wonder whether – once its inner meaning has been brought out below – it might not turn out to be a response that we share, albeit in different languages.

Before developing this argument, however, there is a further point to be made about the prison of colonial modernity. It is by now a matter of open historical record that all the modern human sciences were formed in the era of colonial empires, and that all of them evolved in ways that reproduced that world as well as reflecting it. The recent extension of this record to include what later became the discipline of IR is indeed a salutary and necessary development. But exactly how does this bear upon the question of how we should define the vocation of IR today?

As Blaney and Tickner note, Anthropology’s original allocation – ‘the savage slot’ – was even more unpromising than IR’s. And yet ‘academic disciplines have transformed over time, transgressing the boundaries laid down in the modern era’ (6). Anthropology did this not only by decolonizing its categories; it also embraced ‘culture’ as a universal analytic and applied it critically to the study of ‘civilized’ Western societies as well. (Sociologists too discovered long ago that in order to realize the promise of ‘the Sociological imagination’ they would have to break out of the analysis of modern Western social structures alone and to produce a fully historical and comparative field of study.)<sup>viii</sup>

Thus while we must be attentive to all the ways in which colonial tropes remain ‘subliminally present’ (6) in IR discourses, this is only half the task before us; it should not prevent us from elaborating the positive vocation of IR as the study of societal multiplicity and its consequences; and this study in turn needs to extend far beyond specifically colonial forms of co-existence and interaction, for the simple reason that not all inter-societal relations in history have this form. The problem of an IR discourse that suppresses hierarchical North-South relations cannot be fully solved by adopting a (post-colonial) discourse that sees *only* those. Just as Anthropology needs the ontological premise of ‘culture’ in order to explore the variety of human cultures, whatever their individual forms, so too IR needs the idea of multiplicity as the fundamental fact about the world that is presupposed by *all* international relations, colonial or otherwise. But here too, I suspect we agree.

Nonetheless, there remains that fly in the ointment: uneven and combined *development*. After everything we know about the insidious role played by the concept of ‘development’, how can I advocate an intellectual formula that restores it to such a central position?

Let me begin with a counter-question. At the start of their contribution, Blaney and Tickner cite a recent work by Alex Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu: *How the West Came to Rule*.<sup>ix</sup> They do so, I think, to support their claim that Marxism ‘has largely reproduced the Eurocentrism of the field’ (2). And *How the West Came to Rule* is indeed a thorough-going critique of Eurocentric Marxism. It also directly addresses the need to ask (as Blaney and Tickner later describe their own agenda) ‘how the ‘international’ has been enacted as a uni-verse and how the production of a ‘one world world’ has worked to suppress myriad other life forms that are revealed in its very constitution’ (8). Indeed, its central purpose is the recovery of the roles played by non-Western societies (from the Thirteenth Century CE onwards) in the historical processes that led to the emergence of capitalism and the rise of the West. And yet the anti-Eurocentric intellectual method used by Anievas and Nişancioğlu is none other than ‘uneven and combined development’. How can this possibly be?

The answer is that UCD is first and foremost a profound *critique* of the notion of stages (and hence also ladders) of development. Observing the effects of societal multiplicity and interaction, Trotsky rejected the idea that the struggle for freedom in Czarist Russia could succeed only by reproducing the trajectory of more ‘advanced’ countries. On the contrary, unevenness and combination were creating a unique political sociology in Russia which, against all orthodox Marxist expectations, would generate anti-capitalist revolution there *first*, thus *inverting* the polarities of ‘advanced’ and ‘backward’. Or rather, ‘[t]he historical dialectic knows neither naked backwardness nor chemically pure progressiveness. It is all a question of concrete correlations.’<sup>x</sup> (And this did have the wider effect that Trotsky and his followers placed special emphasis on the political agency of colonial and Third World revolutions.)

‘Ah’, it will be said; ‘but this is still only an adjustment inside the developmentalist ideology of modernity. It does not challenge the overall teleology and Eurocentrism of Marxist thought which continues to see modernity as a grand narrative in which industrial capitalism radiates outwards from an originating West.’ Well, on the one hand, this is not so far from a post-colonial view which also defines modernity as a massive imposition of Western power onto the rest of the human world.<sup>xi</sup> It can hardly be a criticism of UCD that it records this same basic imbalance.

But on the other hand, we might also probe Blaney’s and Tickner’s assumptions – so central to their overall argument – about the liabilities of ‘development’. ‘Development’, after all, is in the first instance simply a term that denotes cumulative change or eventuation over time. Societies may develop over time, perhaps becoming more organized, or culturally distinctive, or populous or powerful. But epidemics develop too, as the hosts and hence sources of infection proliferate. So do political crises, living organisms, art forms, ecosystems and so

on. Of course, the concrete meaning of 'development' differs in all these different uses. What they share, however, is the property of cumulative causation of some kind leading to directional change. For the purpose of analysing such phenomena – and what social or biological entities do not experience change over time? – *some* concept of 'development' is indispensable. If it did not exist, it would have to be invented.

In the modern social sciences, however, 'development' in this wide sense is all too easily conflated with a much more specific meaning: the particular forms of socio-historical change associated with industrial capitalism – the destruction of non-capitalist ways of life, the subordination of individuals and society to the impersonal laws of the market, the pursuit of 'progress' via technological change and the accumulation of capital and so on. In this sense, 'development', superimposed onto a world of difference, has long functioned as the legitimating ideology of Western supremacy – serving to mask the violent, hierarchical realities of colonial modernity.

But is this – or need it be – the meaning of 'development' in UCD? It is here that Aneivas' and Nişancioğlu's extension of UCD into the deep historical past becomes so important. For the effect is necessarily to lift the idea away from any automatic association with the 'one world world' of today, enabling us to find out once and for all whether its conception of 'development' really is necessarily 'part of the colonial/capitalist political and economic grammar and knowledge production central to and constitutive of cultural encounters as moments of violence' (7). Surveying their historical narrative, then, what do we find?

We find, at the start, a late-medieval and 'early modern' world of profoundly *uneven* development in which radically different forms of society coexisted – post-feudal Europe, Mongol nomads, Mughal India, Ming China, the Ottoman empire, African chiefdoms, Amerindian societies and so on. Human society was multiple, and social formations had developed – meaning they had grown up – differently in different places and at different times. Here, 'unevenness' blocks any definition of development as a unitary phenomenon (Western or otherwise). And it enables us to see the world as both multiple *and* a single whole. Second, we find, (and this is the empirical argument of the book), that these social formations were everywhere in interaction with others; moreover, it was through a particular (geopolitical, mercantile and cultural) concatenation of interactions ('combined development') that there eventually crystallized in North-Western Europe the kind of society we call industrial capitalism. Thus 'combined development' is used to reveal what the unilinear, Eurocentric concept of development had concealed: the interactive participation of non-European societies in a cumulative process of historical change. Third, the spatio-temporal unevenness of this historical process (producing industrialization in Europe before elsewhere) explains in turn the colonial encounter itself, through the drastic steepening of inter-societal inequalities of power that it temporarily produced. 'Colonial modernity', then, is the outgrowth of a particular historical process of uneven and combined development. And finally, across the narrative as a whole, we also find that Aneivas' and Nişancioğlu's empirical argument reveals again and again the radical significance

of the international: for Marxism, for explanatory social theory, for World History accounts of the 'rise of the West' and even (in the Conclusion) for conceptions and practices of political agency today.

In short, when we release UCD from the time-bound context of its original formulation, this empties 'development' of its modernist Eurocentric content; its further qualification of 'development' as everywhere uneven and combined reveals the *general* significance of multiplicity, difference and interaction for the human world; and it thereby also pinpoints the unique potential contribution of IR to the social sciences and humanities. This is why I believe that UCD has a special role to play in springing IR from the prison of Political Science. Quite simply, no other theory places societal multiplicity at the heart of its analysis of social reality in this way.

Still, in the end, it does not really matter whether we work with UCD, postcolonialism, 'encounters with difference', embodied theory or grand theory. What is important is that the long exile of IR at the margin of the social sciences should come to an end. If nothing else, the contributions to this forum have shown that the means to bring that about are gathering from many quarters. Surely the prison(s) cannot hold for much longer.

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### **Notes**

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i Justin Rosenberg, 'International Relations in the Prison of Political Science', *International Relations*,

ii This was the title of a special issue of the *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(3), 2013.

iii Brooks does not identify any grand theories by name, but his argument about king-of-the-hill competitions suggests that it is theories like realism, liberalism, constructivism and so on that he has in mind.

iv David Campbell, 'Poststructuralism', in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds) *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.206.

v Kenneth Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', *Journal of International Affairs* 44:1, 21.

vi Martin Wight, 'Why is There no International Theory?', in *Diplomatic Investigations* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1966), p.20.

vii Stanley Hoffmann, 'International Relations: The Long Road to Theory', *World Politics*, 11:(3), 1959; Barry Buzan and Richard Little, 'Why International Relations has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to do About it',

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*Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30(1), 2001, pp.19-21; Fred Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994); Chris Brown, 'The Poverty of Grand Theory', *European Journal of International Relations* 19(3), 2013.

viii C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1959). See especially chapter 7 ('The Human Variety') and chapter 8 ('Uses of History').

ix Alex Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu, *How the West Came to Rule. The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press 2015).

x Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Volume III, (New York: Pathfinder, 1932), p. 379.

xi For a sympathetic critique of postcolonial theory using UCD, see Kamran Matin, 'Redeeming the universal: postcolonialism and the inner life of Eurocentrism' *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(2), 2013, pp. 353-377.

### **Author Biography**

Justin Rosenberg is Professor of International Relations at the University of Sussex. His research focuses on the intersection between International Relations and social theory. His publications include *The Empire of Civil Society* (London: Verso 1994), *The Follies of Globalisation Theory* (London: Verso 2001), and numerous articles on 'uneven and combined development'.